

Play is tale of woman who fought in Civil War

Peter Vaughan
Star Tribune Staff Writer

For playwright Beth Gilleland, the search for Frances Clayton began with a brief, intriguing mention in a book on Minnesota history.

There it was reported that Clayton, a St. Paul resident, had disguised herself as a man and served in the Civil War until she was wounded in the 1863 battle of Stone's River in Tennessee.

It wasn't Gilleland who first spotted the item, but Ron Peluso, artistic director of the Great American History Theatre, who knew Gilleland as an actress and playwright. He contacted Gilleland, whose past plays have been monologues exploring her experiences and thoughts.

"I saw this tiny paragraph in '150 Years of St. Paul' at the Historical Society. I was intrigued by the story and decided to call Beth. I knew she was interested in women's things, and liked her writing style," he said.

Gilleland accepted the challenge and began a search for Clayton that has extended to Civil War battlefields, newspaper files, movies, Ken Burns' epic TV series, books and historical archives in a host of states including Min-

Civil Ceremony

- **Who:** Great American History Theatre. Written by Beth Gilleland.
- **Where:** Crawford Livingston Theatre, 30 E. 10th St., St. Paul.
- **When:** Saturday through March 31.
- **Tickets:** \$10-\$16. 292-4323.

nesota, Massachusetts, Missouri, Maryland, Tennessee, Ohio and Virginia. The result is "Civil Ceremony," which opens Saturday at Peluso's theater.

She discovered that the book reference to Clayton was apparently based on an 1863 article in a Brainerd, Minn., newspaper that told of a woman, who had fought in the Civil War, being harassed by a gang of local toughs. The newspaper mentioned that Clayton was given a uniform by her husband and joined him in combat. Clayton, it said, was from Missouri and her husband from Minnesota.

When she was wounded at Stone's River, a doctor discovered her deception, and she was sent home. Her husband died in the same battle. Beyond that newspaper article, Gilleland was unable to find any material connecting

Clayton to Minnesota.

She did discover that in Missouri two Claytons, one named Frances and the other with her husband's name, had enlisted in the Union Army as brothers.

Adding to the mystery, Gilleland discovered an article similar to the Brainerd one in a Cincinnati paper of roughly the same date that indicated Clayton was an Ohioan.

Any suspicion that Clayton was myth was dispelled when Gilleland discovered, in a Boston library, photos showing Clayton dressed as a man in her Union uniform and as a woman in a dress. The photos were donated to the library in the 1940.

While Gilleland was unable to unearth much more of Clayton's story, she came up with enough to make her a central figure in "Civil Ceremony," along with her husband and three other soldiers from Minnesota.

Clayton was not alone in her deception. A recent article in Prologue magazine estimated that 400 women on both sides donned male garb to fight in the war.

Gilleland's quest took her to a number of battlefields including Stone's River and Shiloh. She also visited Fort Snelling to savor 19th-century military life. Though

she knew something of the Civil War, its origins and outcome, she came away from her research with an expanded vision.

"It was a very sad story, a very devastating war. It divided families, West Point instructors from their students. I started out with too much material, but there were some things I knew I wanted. I wanted to comment on how we observe war. I found it fascinating that back then people packed picnics to see the first Battle of Bull Run. They came to see an altercation, and then when it got serious, they retired."

When she discovered that photographers of the time were not above posing bodies for maximum effect, Gilleland started thinking about the relationship of truth and history.

"How can we be sure of the veracity of past events? Almost everyone was shocked to hear that women fought as men, but when the stories came out they were squelched because comingling with the opposite sex in those conditions was so shocking," she said.

Her biggest surprise was discovering that both North and South maintained prison camps such as Andersonville, the Confederate camp in which captured



Star Tribune Photo by Jeff Wheeler

Beth Gilleland, author of the play "Civil Ceremony," on the set under construction. Assembling part of the set in background is Roger Skophammer.

Union soldiers were mistreated.

Constructing a play with multiple characters and scenes and continual dialogue was alien territory for a playwright who usually performs her own material.

"The hardest thing for me was having so many people involved in the process. When you are writing for yourself, you only have a director and the people who hired you, but in this there are eight actors who have been involved as well as the director. To get feedback from that many people has been a challenge and not in a bad way. It just makes for more opinions. . . .

"It's also been fun to see dia-

logue work; coming out of someone else's mouth and see what other people do with your words," she said.

Gilleland would like to pursue her quest for Frances Clayton, but chances are it will have to wait. In the next few months she and her frequent partner Dane Staufer will be performing "Shedding Light" in Florida, the Twin Cities and very likely at the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland.

"It drives me crazy," she said about Clayton's life and history. "I want to pursue it, but I don't know where else to look at this point."